[Street Cries and Criers of New York]

Duplicate

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Terry Roth

ADDRESS 47 W. 69th St. New York

DATE November 3, 1938

SUBJECT STREET CRIES AND CRIERS OF NEW YORK

1. Date and time of interview

Recorded over a period of time by staff-worker.

2. Place of interview

3. Name and address of informant

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Terry Roth

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SUBJECT STREET CRIES AND CRIERS OF NEW YORK

There are in the City of Now York about 3000 licensed pushcart peddlers and three thousand other types.

Twenty five years ago the pushcart peddler traversed the streets at will, offering his merchandise and taking his chances on being chased away by the police if he lingered too long in any one spot. Under a previous administration, various streets and sections were turned over as permanent pushcart markets, there are still about 80 of these in various parts of the city. But the old street crier has managed to survive, even though he is often persecuted by neighborhood Boards of Trade, who make it more difficult for him to procure a license and who have him arrested if he dares to operate without one.

The sidewalks of Harlem resound to springhtlier music than is heard on the East or West side of the city, for carefree street vendors employ amusing jingles and syncopated rhythms in offering their wares. Market songs chanted and sung by negro pushcart, horsecart and cook-shack sellers of food stuffs impart an air of bristling hilarity to the curb commerce of the section. Cracklin's, 2 yams, sweet potatoes, pompanoes and “greasy

greens and 'buttah' beans” are inspirations for songs. The merits of edioles on hand are extolled in songs with such lucid titles as “The Street Chef”, Ice Cream Man”, “Harlem Menu” Vegetable Song” “Chef of New Orleans”, “Hot Dawg Dan” and “Yallah Yams.” While many of these Harlem market songs were originated on the spot when trade dragged, others have their origin in the South and in the British and Spanish speaking Indies.

Here's a song that greets you from the man wheeling a white cart, laden with foodstuffs: “Sund'y folks eats chicken; Mond'y ham an' greens, Tuesd'y's de day fo' pork chops; Wednesd'y rice an' beans. Thuhsd'y de day fo' 'tatoes, Candied sweets or French fried leans, Fish on Frid'y some foks says, But Sat'd'y gimme kidney beans, Yasseh! Plain kidney beans!

Or the tune of the “Street Chef”: “Ah'm a natu'al bo'n cook An' dat ain't no lie, Ah can fry po'k chops An bake a lowdown pie. So step right up An' help you'se'f Fum de vittles on Mah kitchen she'f.”

Many of the tunes are improvised to meet the needs of the moment. Since the migration of West Indian negroes to New York, songs typical of the Island vendors have been heard in Harlem's teeming streets. One such cry of the West Indian vendor is: “Yo tengo guineos! Yo tengo cocoas! Yo tengo pinas, tambien!

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Several of the songs are melodic recitations of wares on hand. A notable example of this type is: “Ah got string beans! Ah got cabbage! Ah got collard greens! Ah got um! Ah got um!

The crier repeats all his commodities in groups of three until the list is exhausted. The he concludes with: “Ah got anythin' you' need, Ah'm de Ah-got-um man!”

Only two songs mention other localities: “Ah come fum down in New Orleans, Whar dey cook good vittles, Speshly greens.”

Thus the clam man lifts his voice: “In Virginny we goes clammin' We goes clammin' ev'y night An' de water lays dere still lak, Lawd, a mighty purty night! Clams an' oysters fo' de takin'. Ant we gits em ev'y one; Twell de sun comes up ashinin', An' our clamnin' she am done. Ho! Clahmmmmmmmmmms! Ho! Clahmmmmmmmmmms!

Some songs die out as trade languishes and others promptly arise to take their places. So long as there are curb markets in Harlem, and a spirited, joyous race to buy from them, the push cart man and the street crier of the section undoubtedly will continue to contribute to the unique cries of the city.

The peddler often keeps to the same territory for years. His merchandise usually is honest stuff, although it's cleanliness may be questioned and his cargo and cries vary, the season and the neighborhood often compel him to change his location.

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In the Bronx and Staten Island areas, the fish peddler is the most colorful vendor. Early every Friday morning he pounds the pavement, pushing his cart filled with the catch of the previous (?) day. The neighborhood is aroused by a shrill, shreiking “Wahoo! Wahoo!”, followed by a list of the fish he features. During the entire operation of selling, weighing and cleaning the fish for the customer, he continues to send out inhuman cries to attract the attention of the housewife.

Another vendor with his raucous, indistinct cry is the fruit, vegetable and flower man. Such strange cries as “Ahps!” (apples) peeeeeches! “flowwwwhers!” herald his approach. His horse, with its unkempt hide, drooped belly, projecting bones and spavined legs leads the way. Huge price signs, with figures large enough to be read from the top floor, entice the buyer. The peddler winds in and out of the streets of the city, bellowing, yodelling, whining, purposefully indistinct cries that will attract the curiosity of the housewife and bring her to the window to discover tho cause of the connection; a philosophy similiar to that of

the extra news hawks. She is met by the tempting display of the wares and the attractive prices. The crier has made his contact.

Still another familiar figure is the Cash Clothes man. He is usually of Jewish birth, small, dark and well clothed. In his hand he carries a newspaper rolled up to form a stick, which he waives as he walks the streets. “I Cash Clothes. Cash Clothes” is his song and into it he puts all the Hebraic tonal qualities, the combination of a lilt and a whine; a nasal cry with the touch of the old world. The Cash Clothes man is shrewd, with a quick eye for a bargain.

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Closely related to him is the Rag and Junk man, with his “Any rags, any junk, any old hip flask?”

Within the last decade the junk man has practically eliminated his call and replaced it with a string of bells. This is due to the fact that the majority of these vendors are foreigners with no knowledge of the English language. It is one of the few street trades that requires no conversation and is therefore a logical means to a living for the immigrant. An existing legend has it that the newly arrived foreigner, knowing no English, simply offers a nickel for any article, trusting that the average re-sale price will be considerably more. Should the customer seem offended, and should the article seem unusually attractive, the dealer will offer an additional nickel. These practices are interesting when we realize that the immigrant vendor has very often made rapid financial progress and in the past, a number of large American merchant fortunes have been built on just such beginnings.

The Eastside is a huddle of wheeled conveyances which reaches from Grand Street to East Houston Street in the vicinity of Orchard and Allen Streets. Here, in a colorful pageant, reminiscent of the bazaars of the Far East, is the strange symphony of many foreign tongues. Pushcart peddlers and hucksters line the streets, mumbling, cajoling, wrying, dragging you by the arm, enticing you to buy” Pickled, pickled, piiiiiickled

Watermilyons!" "baked sweets", or "yams what am", "sour pickles, "mops, brooms, everything tin", "hots here, hots, got your hots today." Here you can buy anything from a fur coat to a left shoe; here the most amazine discarded articles have been sold.

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And still another group is the sidewalk Pitchman — he belongs to the nomadic tribe, here how, and gone at the first approach of a uniform. His merchandise is likely to be less honest but his salesmanship more startling than that of his brother street hawker. He has a definite technique and the term "racket" is often applied to his business. After he has set up his "tripes", his assistant, or "sticks" as they are called, recognizes a rare opportunity to buy a bargain and hastily purchases a ring or what-not from him. The "stick" then edges out of the group which is always sure to gather, and approaches from another angle, and again buys a gimcrack. "Now you don't have to be an Arthur Brisbane to know that this watch I hold in my hand is genuiiiine. Step up closer. Listen to it — examine it — what a beauty! Only one fourth of a dollar. Twenty five cents."

The true pitchman travels from state to state, is rather clannish and has his own trade jargon. He has a rigid code of business ethics for his associates, if not for his customers. He must be an entertainer as well as a salesman and he must possess sharp eyes and agility of limb to keep him out of the way of the police.

In America we can trace the crier to the latter part of the 18th century. In rural districts, in the days before retail stores were as plentiful as they are today, the peddler was a welcome visitor. As he approached the house, he would call out in his peculiar sing song manner: "Sam Wilson, pots and pans, Calico, candy, toys and cans, Medicine, dishes, brooms and wares, Sam is here, forget your cares."

The trader was a jolly, shrewd business man. In his pocket he carried a little book in which he noted the names of the children 7 of the family, a list of last Spring's purchases, and any gossip that might interest the mistress of the house. Usually, the children received

a stick of licorise as a present from Sam. First he visited in the kitchen with the mistress, giving her news of the neighboring villages and suggesting purchases. Then the sale was made and he moved on to his next customer.

Here are some of the oldest cries of New York: “Here's White sand, choice sand, Here's your lily white S-a-n-d Here's your Rockaway Beach S-a-m-d.”

The sand was used on floors, after they were scrubbed. And another: “Here's cat-tails; cat-tails; to make beds; going.”

In the early morning you could see the dirty chimney sweeps, in their tattered garments, going through the streets, crying: “Sweep O-O-O-O From the bottom to the top Without ladder or a rope Sweep O-O-O-O”

Then came the garbage collector in his horse drawn cart: “This man on his cart, As he drives along, His bell doth swing Ding dong, dong ding.”

Another familiar figure was the rag man, swinging his bag over his shoulder and singing out, “Tumble up, tumble up, old rope, old rope.”

In the old days, the crier was a romantic figure who approached his customer with melodious madrigals, and was a respected member of the community. He was a one-man fair, who often added a jig or a touch of comedy to lend color to his little songs. Harlem particularly has managed to retain some of this gayety, but 8 today we have grown accustomed to look upon the street vendor as a semi-mendicant and consider our purchases almost as alms. As an institution, the street crier is obsolete, but the rapidly vanishing members of that troup still add a touch of color to the streets of New York.